

How Can Fashion Designers Make Clothes Less Disposable?

by [Timo Rissanen, Parsons The New School for Design](#), 04/19/11



Photo by [Howard Lake](#)

The current [disposability of clothing](#) is problematic. While clothes are seemingly durable goods, they are often marketed as fast-changing fashions and made of increasingly inexpensive materials with quality of construction often neglected. Clothing today is more economically accessible than ever before, at least in developed nations. Compromises in the quality of fabric and construction, and the [outsourcing of manufacture](#) to nations of cheap labor enable us to buy clothing in quantities not seen before.



Photo by [Roger Nelson](#)

Despite the relatively low economic costs of fabric and clothing, these should be treated as precious and valuable due to the investments embodied by the fabrics and garments, investments made during [fiber generation, design, and manufacture](#). These investments may include water, material resources, energy, and time. Fabric is a product with an ecological footprint attached but arguably not always treated as such by the fashion industry. Nevertheless, relatively small increases in material inputs (fabric) at the fashion-design stage can result in more physically and visually durable garments. Hypothetically this could result in a lesser need for new clothes.

MAKE ALLOWANCES

Fifteen percent of the fabric used to make an average garment is waste; this waste is disposed of after cutting. This may not sound substantial until one thinks of the entire global fashion industry. Much of this “waste” could be incorporated into garments, for example, to reinforce parts that are prone to stress.

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Some of the “wasted” fabric may also be incorporated into larger allowance, which enable alteration, whether to accommodate a change in the wearer or fashion. Making a pair of pants larger without the insertion of extra fabric, for instance, is easy with strategically planned wider seam and hem allowances. Perhaps future alterability should become a consideration for fashion design.

One obstacle for this may be the perception of seam allowances as waste. Some 5.5 percent of the total fabric in a garment is in the seam and hem allowances, and generally, the pattern maker is responsible for ensuring that the allowances are kept to the “practical minimum.” This does not, however, account for the entire use-life of a garment; seam allowances in fact can be an asset, an investment in the garment’s future. [“Fast fashion”](#) may be more difficult to repair for practical, economic, and psychological reasons, perhaps tempering the view of seam and hem allowances as waste.



VISIBLE REPAIRS

Two older manuals on domestic clothing construction discuss repair in detail. Both suggest that repair should be invisible. A visible repair somehow disturbs the look of a garment, devalues it. Could visible repair, and reparability, be an inherent aspect of a garment’s appearance?

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A look into dress history outside the Western tradition, to a Japanese island at the beginning of the 20th century, reveals an alternative: garments that constantly change in appearance yet remain essentially the same; garments that can remain in use indefinitely.

The [fishermen's coats from Awaji Island](#) are made of indigo-dyed cotton covered with white *sashiko* quilting stitches. These coats gradually fade with washing and exposure. A spectacular aspect of these coats is their ability to “absorb” repair without compromise to their aesthetic appeal. A hole is covered with a quilted patch of fabric; the patch is initially darker but fades over time. While the number of patches grows, the overall look of the coat is maintained: the patches *become* the coat.

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The coats may no longer be worn as the culture in which they originated has dramatically changed but they teach a powerful lesson. There is virtually no limit to how long such a garment could remain in use, living with the wearer(s). How could one apply this idea to contemporary fashion design? How could one design garments whose value is not diminished by alteration or repair?

Kate Fletcher, author of [Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys](#) notes how clothes are presented to consumers as almost sacrosanct, resulting in passive fashion that discourages alteration and customization. Perhaps the key for fashion design is to embrace disturbance. For example, clothes by British label [Junky Styling](#) are made from secondhand clothes, and the two designers, Kerry Seager and Annika Sanders, also refashion clothes that customers bring in. **DESIGNING ENDURANCE**

It may seem that [zero-waste fashion design](#) (fashion creation without fabric waste) has only emerged in recent years as part of the latest wave of “sustainable fashion.” It is evident, however, that garments have been designed and made with little or no waste for centuries. And in contemporary design, such an approach has been evident for several decades in the works of [Claire McCardell](#), [Zandra Rhodes](#), and [Yeohlee Teng](#), among others.

Although zero-waste fashion appears to be a recent phenomenon, garments have been designed and made with little or no waste for centuries.

The “Endurance” shirt, which I exhibited in [“Fashioning Now”](#) in 2009 and 2010, is cut without fabric waste when two shirts are cut at the same time. The shirt addresses two areas where fashion designers can have an impact. On one hand, the aim is for this garment to create a connection between designer-maker and wearer through incorporating craft techniques into a contemporary garment.

Many of my thought processes are explicit in the garment, aiming to connect with the wearer. For example, to create a blouson at the back, the shirt has an internal waist stay more common in women’s haute couture. With the act of buttoning the stay, the blouson becomes instantly explicit, communicating the stay’s rationale to the wearer. Using the fabric’s selvages as external seam finishes aims to communicate the zero-waste nature of the shirt to the wearer.

On the other hand, the shirt is designed and made to allow later alteration and repair. The hand-quilting at the back waist and in the elbow patches aims to suggest explicit mending. The objective of this is that later visible repair or alteration would not compromise the garments aesthetically.

Furthermore, surplus fabric is designed into the garments to facilitate these activities. An internal patch at the back waist in the main fabric could be replaced with another fabric if the patch were required elsewhere in the garment. The elbow patches also have “excess” fabric folded underneath should it be required later.



DESIGNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Design for sustainability, as opposed to sustainable design, refers to design that fosters more sustainable behaviors in users. While much attention has been paid to [fiber choice](#) and [reclaiming materials](#), the broader focus needs to shift to fashion design that supports more sustainable lifestyles among consumers.

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Historical dress can inform 21st century fashion design in the context of environmental sustainability. The [“Utility Scheme”](#) that was in place in the United Kingdom during and after World War II placed various restrictions on clothing manufacture to make the most of scarce resources. The scheme’s aesthetic restrictions may not be plausible in a contemporary design context, but the improvements in quality that the scheme achieved may hold a lesson for contemporary fashion design.

Testament to this quality is a man’s suit in the [Victoria and Albert Museum](#) in London, which the owner wore from 1945 to 1982—37 years. To achieve such a long use-life not only requires careful design and stringent garment-manufacturing standards,, but also a high-quality fabric. The scheme shows that quality does not have to mean economic inaccessibility, something the contemporary fashion industry probably needs to investigate further.

To help designers extend the useful life of garments by design, [Cameron Tonkinwise](#), chair of design thinking and sustainability at Parsons, sums up the design brief: “Design timely things, things that can last longer by being able to change over time. Design things that are not finished, things that can keep on by keeping on being repaired and altered, thing in motion.

Clothes that are never finished: a formidable yet an exciting task.

Adapted from [Shaping Sustainable Fashion: Changing the Way We Make and Use Clothes](#) (Earthscan, 2011), edited by Alison Gwilt and Timo Rissanen

that these clothes are already cut into, doing so again in the future is perhaps easier.